

SILK AND COTTON INDUSTRY 1809

I have been asked to expand the history with regard to the Wheelock Silk Mill, now part of the Zan works. I did cover this briefly in the Dec 98 Magazine. Wheelock Silk Mill was built in 1809 as a 3 storey building using steam power. The boiler house was built separately from the mill.

The process of making silk starts off with the cocoon of the silk worm. The cocoon was made of a secreted liquid from the silk worm which would protect the larva as it changed into a moth.

This cocoon when empty is boiled to separate the strands. This is known as "reeling". These threads were wound up into a skein of raw silk, and was imported into the country through merchants in London. It was then brought to the mill site, where it was wound on to a bobbin so that knots, impurities and variation of thickness could be taken out.

The buildings housed the machines which twisted the raw silk into threads, and then into lengths of silk. The thickness of the finished silk could vary from 8 to 10 strands for very fine silk, and sometimes 24 strands were spun into one thread. The thickness could vary, as royal gowns were made of the thicker thread and ladies handkerchiefs were made of very fine thread.

The operator was called a throwster.

Around 1870 the mill changed into the production of cotton. Some machines could be quickly adapted to spin the new type of work.

The new work was to produce fustian (velvet). This needed two different grades of thread, linen was used for the background (the warp) and best cotton for the pile (the weft)

Linen was made from the flax plant, and the cotton from the seeds of the cotton plant. The plant produces a seed covered in "down", this was harvested from the growing plants, then baled and shipped to England mainly through Liverpool or Manchester. The main cotton industry was in Lancashire.

On arrival at the mill, the cotton was cleaned and beaten to remove seeds and any rubbish. The tangled "down" was then carded and made into a loose rope, this was known as "slubbing" it was then twisted and spun into yarn, again varying in quality and thickness.

Here in Wheelock and Wheelock Heath, (the old northern caravan site as you go into Winterley) they made velvet.

The mill space where it was woven, was a room of usually 50 to 100 yards in length. Two machines were set side by side to allow the cutter to walk up and down the room cutting the loops in the fabric. This was done by using a very sharp knife, some cutters used two knives at a time. So unique was the cutting process that once a cutter had started the fabric , no one could take over from him even if he became ill and had to be off work. Men often walked 34 miles per day doing this, and ladies walked around 28 miles. The light in the mill was not too good, as they used gas lights and it was hard to see at some stages, so they developed a candle holder to fit on their hats, and these could be seen by others through the window as they passed by. Children also worked in the mill.